

Television by agnesamaranth

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Summary:

"He wakes to the garbled sound of static, to a pale glow emanating from the television set across the room."

Eleven's still gone, but she visits Mike while everyone else sleeps. And not just in his dreams.

Television

January 1984

Mike is happy during the days.

He's happy with his friends. They go sledding in the soft snow that's dusted the hill in Cherry Park like powdered sugar. They spend long days that seem, to them, like short hours campaigning in his basement, fighting dragons and multi-headed monsters. They eat pizza, with pineapple, pepperoni and mushrooms to make them all happy. And they go to school, where their short-lived popularity has receded, though this doesn't particularly bother Mike.

He's happy with his family. With his mother, who always gives him just a little bit of extra dessert and has taken an hour off his weekend curfew so that he can stay up until 11:30. With his older sister, who he sometimes chats with just before bed; about her future college applications, about the latest book he's devoured. With his little sister, who, without much trouble, convinces him to play ponies on Saturday mornings before he goes to Lucas's for cartoons; who calls him My-Key in a pronounced way and a precocious voice. And with his father, who's mostly just there, existing, though this doesn't particularly bother Mike.

Mike carries the memory of a girl with him—in his heart, in the back of his mind. The memory of a girl with big eyes and a big heart. She lives in the moments he sometimes stares off into the distance. She exists in the stories he weaves for his campaigns; a warrior princess, proud and powerful.

She's become a ghost—mostly. At least during the days.

At night, she comes to life.

Her face, soft and trusting—only of him—fills his dreams; it's burned onto the back of his eyelids that flutter closed, heavy with sleep, in the darkness of his bedroom. In his dreams, she's happy too. She's smiling and laughing and eating pizza in his basement.

It's an icy night in January when Mike falls asleep on the couch in the living room, his science textbook open on his chest, pencil fallen to the floor. On this windless, cloudless, colourless night, she begins to truly haunt him, transforming from memory to ghost.

He wakes to the garbled sound of static, to a pale glow emanating from the television set across the room. Squinting through tired eyes, blinking away grogginess, Mike feels around his head for the remote, reaching under pastel-coloured pillows, certain he'd managed to roll onto the small device in his sleep. His search futile, hands empty and feeling nothing but some lost change, Mike stands and stretches, textbook clattering to the ground, the fall muted by the thick carpet. Goosebumps form on his bare arms, the t-shirt he wears not designed for a winter's night, not even in the Wheeler's comparatively warm home. He pads over to the television and twists the dial to an off position.

Mike casts his eyes around the room once more as he leaves, dark save for the soft light that falls through the window from the lamppost outside. He notes, with some surprise, the remote. It's laid flat on the seat of his father's recliner.

Weird.

Silently, he trudges up the stairs to bed proper, asleep before his head hits the pillows, sinking into the warmth of his blankets.

Three days later, Mike has a nightmare. There have been fewer since Christmas, but they're still just as vivid. Her face is there again, as it is in all his favourite dreams. But it's different; dark and cracked and broken.

She shatters.

And so does he.

Mike wakes, sweating and with a heart that's pounding against his ribs, desperate for its pain to be felt. His throat is hoarse and sore.

Did I scream?

There's no stirring from the other rooms, no crying from Holly or

concerned calling out from Nancy, so that's unlikely. Mike slides out of bed and bedroom, creeping across the carpet, soft under his bare feet, down the stairs and to the kitchen for a glass of water.

As he passes the living room, eager to return to bed, the television flickers to life. Static, black and white and distorted, fills the silent space between him and the small box.

Cautiously, tentatively, Mike enters the living room and stands over the television, his hand hovering inches from the screen. He gulps, throat suddenly dry again. In one swift motion, like the ripping off of a bandage, he turns the dial.

Silence. Darkness. But only for a moment.

Then, static again. This time louder, like his gasp; brighter, like his eyes.

"El?" he whispers into the emptiness of the room, "Is that you?"

Mike isn't sure what he expects in response, isn't sure if he's gone crazy, speaking to his television set at three in the morning. But there is a response—that's the bottom line, that's what matters. The television switches from static to the CBS late night news. A grin plays onto his chapped lips, kissed by winter air and frequently chewed while he's bored in History class.

After this, the television becomes a nightly ritual. Mike's internal clock quickly adjusts itself so that each morning, at an ungodly hour that has become sacred to him, he slinks downstairs and seats himself in front of the screen, wrapped in a blanket and wearing a smile.

He doesn't mind being awake at this hour. Because she's never late. And she shows him the most amazing things—bright colours and beautiful shadows. Like magic, images of cowboys and aliens and superheroes flit across the screen. Soap operas, movies, newscasts, cartoons, and once a nature program on penguins—these are the things she shows him. There's no rhyme or reason; no hidden message, though this doesn't particularly bother Mike.

Because sometimes he thinks he can see her face in the static between

moving images, hear her voice whispering his name.

Yes, Mike is happy during the days. He has his friends and his family.

But Mike is happier when seeing the sunset; he loves to watch the darkness swallow up the sky as night falls.

Because at night, Eleven comes alive.

At night, he has hope that one day she'll be more than a just ghost and more than just a memory.

Author's Note:

Hey folks!

Thanks for reading—I hope you enjoyed this teensy little fic. I'd love to read your thoughts and feedback so leave it all below.

Update for Monster Hunters early next week, I promise!

Inspired by the song "Television" by Jack's Mannequin

Thanks again & much love.

Val <3